USING FEAR APPEALS FOR A.I.D.S. PREVENTION: AN ANALYSIS OF AROUSAL AND AD RESPONSE

Michael S. LaTour, Old Dominion University

Abstract

A holistic model reveals the impact of A.I.D.S. prevention advertising on dimensions of arousal and subsequent impressions of the advertisement. These exploratory results indicate that levels of arousal and impressions of the advertisement vary according to emphasis upon the deadly consequences of A.I.D.S. These findings have substantial strategic implications.

Background For This Research

The emotion of fear refers to a broad range of psychological conditions leading to diverse behavior (Thomson, 1979). Different fearful reactions are attributed to physiological factors, idiosyncratic or individually unique experiences, and the sociocultural contexts of fear-producing situations (Izard, 1977).

Lazarus (1975) contends that fear arises as a result of a situation being appraised as dangerous. Schachter (1975) takes a somewhat different view maintaining that an affective state is a function of arousal associated with an appropriate cognition formed by one's perception of the stimulus. In contrast to both Lazarus and Schachter, Zajonc (1968; 1980) contends that affective orientations, including fear, can be produced immediately and generated by motor, glandular, autonomic, and visceral systems prior to cognition taking place.

Mayes (1979) takes an integrative approach to the interface between fear arousal and cognition. He maintains that an individual might generate fear by associating current surroundings with previous situations or innate responses "built in" at some stage of maturation. Mayes contends that once an appraisal of threat is reached, a complex set of autonomic, endocrine and cortical systems is activated and leads to "feeling afraid."

According to Thomson (1979) the lack of theoretical specificity pertaining to the emotion of fear is not surprising. He cites the great variety of possible changing sources of fear available in the human condition and the wide range of individual differences in learning to fear specific objects.

Despite difficulty in conceptualizing fear, many advertisements make use of fear arousal. Examples include ads for life insurance, traveler's checks, and automobile safety. While many studies have attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of fear appeals, the results have been very inconsistent. For example, Rotfeld (1986) in his review of the literature covering a variety of fear appeals studies, concludes:

Assuming the validity of past research conceptualizations, the theoretical construct of an optimal level of fear has not been upheld by the data. "High fear" might be more persuasive for some people, under some conditions. Sometimes it is not. It is not because there is an optimal level of fear for persuasion but rather, because there are other elements of the individual's cognitive structure at work.

Lang, Rice and Sternbach (1972) contend that an emotion such as fear is a function of complex psychophysiological responses. Research is needed that takes into account the idiosyncratic, multidimensional impact of fear appeals on the mind. The present study addresses this issue by evaluating multiple dimensions of fear arousal produced by A.I.D.S. prevention advertising and the resulting impact on cognitive impressions.

Objective

The objective of this research is to introduce a theoretically sound, empirical analysis of fear arousal resulting from A.I.D.S. prevention advertising. Numerous evaluations of a model introduced by R.E. Thayer (Thayer, 1964, 1967, 1978, 1986, 1987; LaTour, 1986; Pitts, Belo & Etzel, 1986) support a idiosyncratic multidimensional theory of arousal. The Thayer model purports that for some people at high levels of stimulation beyond normal daily activities, an energy arousal dimension dominates and is clearly associated with positive feelings about the stimulus, (e.g. the advertisement). For other people, at high levels of stimulation, a tension arousal dimension dominates and is paired with negative feelings about the stimulus.

At high levels of stimulation, tension arousal is negatively correlated with energy arousal. However, at moderate levels of stimulation, both energy and tension are positively correlated (Thayer 1978). This study will evaluate whether a "strong fear appeal" A.I.D.S. prevention advertisement elicits sufficient stimulation of tension arousal to produce negative feelings about the ad and a negative correlation with energy arousal. Such a conclusion would support the strategy of the Center for Disease Control whose advertisements refrain from strong emphasis on the fearful deadly consequences of the disease compared to the approach taken in ads sponsored by European and Australian health authorities.

In the following sections, models of the fear arousal process, its structure and measurability, are discussed. A theoretical model, employing fear arousal as an intervening variable between the stimulus ad and ensuing thoughts about the ad is presented. The relationship between different dimensions of arousal resulting from A.I.D.S. prevention advertising and cognition is analyzed and discussed.
Models Of The Fear Arousal Process

The Fear Drive and Parallel Response Models

While several models of the process have been proposed, those most debated are the fear drive model and parallel response model. The fear drive model posits a process where perceived danger leads to an emotional response to the perceived tension followed by a reduction in fear by pursuing the suggested solution. The response is assumed to be reinforcing as long as the recommended action is sufficient to alleviate fear and the associated tension.

As Figure 1 shows, proponents of this perspective postulate the following process: First, a perceived danger (the stimulus, S) leads to an emotional response (R). Second, the response (R) causes perceived tension (depicted by s) followed by instrumental rehearsal (r) which is synonymous with considering and pursuing the suggested solution. As long as the recommended action is sufficient to alleviate fear and the associated tension, the suggested solution provides a sense of relief (Leventhal 1970, Ray and Wilkie 1970) as indicated by the "fear absent" condition in Figure 1. Otherwise, a dysfunctional effect such as denial of or ignoring the danger may occur. This is synonymous with "new R instrumental" following the "fear present" condition in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

Despite the intuitive appeal of the above model, several scholars have found it difficult to test (Sutton 1982) and evidence of its validity is widely lacking. In addition, the model tends to ignore the complexity of an individual's make-up. For this reason another model, "parallel response" has gained more recognition in recent years.

The basic premise being the parallel response model is that two forces are activated simultaneously in response to a fear: danger control and fear control (see figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

Once a fearful situation is perceived, the danger control component activates an individual's desire to deal with the threatening problem. This response guides a person's search for alternatives. As perceptions of fear intensify, danger control accelerates, reaching its maximum at the medium level of fear arousal. Beyond this level, the ability of an individual to think calmly and to facilitate danger control diminishes. In contrast, the second element, fear control, aims at eliminating the unpleasant fear emotion.

Both the fear control (inhibiting effects) and danger control (facilitating effects) co-exist and impact on one's response jointly. This situation is illustrated by the dashed line in figure 2 representing the combined effects of fear control and danger control. The shape of the curve, however, is determined by the dominating component (Ray and Wilkie 1970) and by the individual's personality (Sternthal and Craig 1974). As Sutton (1982) notes, the model is too general to be testable and functions solely as a heuristic device.

According to Rotfeld (1986), "after all these years there does not exist a sound and supported theory of fear per se." Evaluating arousal as an intervening variable provides the way to explore the interface between a fear appeal stimulus and resulting cognition. One model incorporating individual uniqueness in arousal was developed and validated by Thayer (1967, 1978).

Thayer Arousal Model: Explanation for the Idiosyncrasy of Fear Arousal

Thayer (1978) maintains that arousal is a complex multidimensional phenomenon. Specifically, two major dimensions interact forming Thayer's four factor model of activation. The first continuum (dimension A) ranges from "General Activation" which is associated with inner energy, to "Deactivation Sleep" or to lack of energy (fatigue). The second (dimension B) is a continuum ranging from "High Activation" to "General Deactivation". The "High Activation" factor is associated with tension whereas "General Deactivation" gauges "Calaness." Evaluation of dimensionality of Thayer's model across several studies reveals manifestations of both the two dimensional (dimension A and dimension B) and four dimensional (the four factors acting as separate dimensions) form (LaTour, 1986; Thayer 1986).

According to Thayer (1978), General Activation (energy) is associated with positive affective responses. However, High Activation (tension) if increased to high levels, produces negative affective responses (Thayer, 1978). For example, a stimulus could invoke primarily energy in some people resulting in a positive feeling. If tension arousal is strong and dominant, negative feelings result. If tension does not increase beyond moderate levels, it fails to have a discernable impact and is positively correlated with energy. However at high levels of stimulation, tension "splits" from energy, exhibiting a negative correlation (See Figure 3). Taken together, these dimensions tend to provide a more accurate reflection of total body arousal than individual physiological systems measured separately (Clements, Hafer & Vermilion, 1975).

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

What does the Thayer model tell us about the utility of the fear appeal in marketing? It suggests that the dimension of arousal (energy vs. tension) that dominates varies with the complex psychophysiological make-up of the individual. This phenomena is reflected in the following hypothetical model. (See figure 4).

Hypothetical Model

Because arousal is idiosyncratic, both tension and energy should result from the same fear appeal stimulus (emphasis on deadly consequences of the disease). Some people will be primarily